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ABSTRACT

In any successful conversation, a speaker must select both what is said and how it is said on the basis of various estimates of the listener's abilities, knowledge and interests. Most research on linguistic input to children has focused on the tendency of speakers to simplify their speech for the younger listener. Little attention has been paid to the ways in which adults might introduce material that is outside the child's current system, but that the child is ready to acquire. This paper reports a longitudinal study of the "fine-tuning" of parents' speech to a child over a particular conceptual domain: reference to events that happened outside the current context at an earlier point in time. Reference to past in the adults' speech was chosen for study since temporal reference is a complex part of language acquisition where one finds both the child's comprehension and usage changing gradually over a long period of time. The data consisted of transcripts of interactions between a first-born child and her mother or father when she was 20 months to 29 months old. It was concluded that speakers are sensitive to specific cues from the linguistic behavior of the child, and use these cues in selecting topics that (1) structure the conversation to allow the child to participate most effectively, and (2) present opportunities for the child to acquire new forms at appropriate times. (Author/AMH)

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TOPIC SELECTION IN PARENT-CHILD DISCOURSE

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In any successful conversational interaction, a speaker must select both what is said and how it is said based on estimates of the listener's intellectual capacities, interests, attentiveness, real world knowledge, and linguistic knowledge. When we consider "linguistic input" of adults to young children, we are dealing with interactions where there are great differences between the conversational partners in all of these areas. Research has established clearly that speakers tend to "simplify" their speech in a general way for children (Broen, 1972; Phillips, 1973; Snow, 1972). Furthermore, some have suggested that adults who are effective in talking to children are sensitive to characteristics of the particular child being addressed (Cross, 1977) and to the feedback from that child (Gleason, 1977). In other words, as well as using a "speech register" for children, the adult fine-tunes his or her speech for the individual child in a conversational interaction.

Most of the work on input to date has focused on the degree to which speakers limit or simplify their speech for the child. Relatively little attention has been given to the ways in which adult speech might introduce material that is still outside the child's system, but that the child is ready to acquire. A suggestion about the introduction of new syntactic forms has been made by both Snow (1977) and van der Geest (1977): that the adult limits the semantic content of his or her speech to the ideas the child already expresses, while realizing these ideas in syntactic forms more complex than the child's. Such input would provide an opportunity to learn particular syntactic structures at appropriate times. For the semantic domains studied by Snow and van der Geest,

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changes in the content the child intends to express are presumed to be the result of the child's non-linguistic cognitive development.

However, one might imagine that there may be conceptual domains wherein the child is exposed to new ideas through linguistic interaction with adults (e.g., Blank, 1975). In this paper, data will be presented from a longitudinal study of parent-child discourse suggesting that parents are not always limited in terms of their choice of topic, or semantic content, to what the child already expresses.

The semantic domain studied here was reference to past events. Temporal reference is a complex part of the language where one finds both the child's comprehension and usage changing gradually over a long period of time (Brown, 1973; Cromer, 1968). I was interested in tracing how a child and her parents first started to talk about what had happened outside the immediate situation they were in. As has been noted by Antinucci and Miller (1976), Bloom, Lifter and Tanouye (1977), Bronkadt and Sinclair (1973) and others, the child's earliest use of the past markers in English (-ed and irregular past) occurs in descriptions of events in the immediate situation, often where an end result of the event is in evidence, as in "I fell down" or "I broke it." In many languages, this change of state is signalled by a syntactic marker that is different from the marker used to indicate past time, and is considered part of the aspectual system. In English, aspect and time are collapsed onto the same morpheme. Though the data in this study would be relevant for a consideration of aspect and tense, it should be noted that the distinction of interest was whether the event occurred in or outside the immediate situation (see Chafe, 1974 for a discussion of the role of the perception of time in linguistic temporal

distinctions). Since we were not coding for the aspectual usage per se, I will refer here to the first semantic function the child acquires as Immediate past.

Only later does the child use past markers to talk about events that occurred at an earlier time. I will refer to this semantic function as Earlier past. In this study, rather than focusing on the emergence of the syntactic markers for past, we have focused on the emergence of the intention to refer to Earlier past.

Method

The child observed was my daughter, Naomi, a first-born child. The data consisted of transcripts of interactions between Naomi and her mother or father, when Naomi was 20 months (MLU 1.00) to 29 months (MLU 4.00).

A few comments should be made here to justify the use of interactional data in which one of the participants was a researcher interested in interaction. First, these data were collected in 1970, when I was interested in Naomi's speech but not yet attending to the role of parental input. I recognize there may be some distortion of the interactions due to the fact that I was observing Naomi. However, we recorded very frequently (in some periods every other day) across a wide variety of situations, and tried to allow the recordings to simply sample everyday interactions. Secondly, I am not trying to draw conclusions based on these data about how parents in general talk to their children. Obviously a study of any one set of parents would not be appropriate for that question. Rather, I am trying to see patterns in the language of this particular child in relationship to the kind of input data she had to work from.

Approximately 5,700 utterances by Naomi and the adult utterances to her in that period were coded for reference to past events, using both the verbal context and notes about the nonlinguistic context to determine the semantic intent.

All utterances referring to past, whether or not they were marked for past reference, were selected for analysis.

The past utterances were coded as Immediate past, Earlier past, or Other. Adult and child utterances were coded as Immediate past if the event referred to had just occurred, as shown in (1) - (3). Note that in the first example, the intention to refer to a just-completed event is not realized with a syntactic marker.

(1) (Naomi has uncovered her foot)

Naomi: I find foot.

(2) (Naomi has closed the door)

Naomi: Closed it.

(3) (Father has turned off the light)

Father: There, we turned it off.

Utterances were coded as referring to Earlier past only if the event was clearly not in the immediate situation, as in (4) - (6).

(4) (Talking with Mother about what happened that day)

Naomi: I play with Todd's toys.

(5) (Naomi and Mother are talking about Naomi's morning)

Naomi: I put the toys away. Was messy.

(6) (Talking about outing earlier in day)

Mother: Mommy fixed the picnic table.

The category "Other" covers cases in which neither category described above applied clearly, and these utterances were not used in this analysis. For example, reference to an event that occurred a few minutes before the utterance would

have been coded as Other, as would use of past in narratives and fantasy, and in descriptions of psychological states (as in "I thought you knew that.").

Each past reference was also classified as a Topic Initiation or Response. Initiation utterances were Comments and Questions that did not follow directly from the partner's utterance. Responses consisted of Answers, Imitations, or Expansions, and Comments or Questions that sustained the topic that had been introduced.

Results and Discussion

Before turning to the characteristics of the input, it is useful to have a brief overview of Naomi's acquisition of the meanings and syntax of past in this period. As is summarized in Table 1, from 20 to 25 months in non-imitated utterances she referred only to events in the immediate situation, using a routine

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Insert Table I about here

(I did it) to indicate successful completion of an action (for example, when she managed to put a book into an opening in a bookshelf) and other verbs that were occasionally marked for past syntactically. By 22 months, some overgeneralizations appeared suggesting that the -ed morpheme was productive, as in I doed it (for "I did it") or I booded Gammy (meaning "I said boo to Gammy").

Reference to earlier events first appeared in the 26th month (at MLU 3.00), along with a lexical item that meant any time in the past, yestermorning. Throughout this period, Naomi had not reached the 90% criterion that Brown used to indicate that the child had acquired a grammatical morpheme, with 77% of her references to past realized with past markers at 29 months (MLU 4.00).

Turning to the speech of the adults, it is easy to find evidence that they limited their use of past, presumably in order to facilitate Naomi's participation in conversations. For example, we might expect some reflection of the child's overall frequency of past usage in the parents' speech. Naomi used past reference only rarely throughout the period studied, with 253 utterances (4% of the data) referring to past. There was a similar infrequent use of past by the parents, with 319 past references occurring.

Furthermore, we can look at what sort of past the parent used with the child. Before 26 months, over half of the parents' references to past were Immediate past. In adult-adult speech, when Immediate past is used, it would usually be to inform someone that something had happened that had not been noticed. In talking to the child, on the other hand, Immediate past usually encoded in language something the child had been doing, as in examples (7) - (10). (Naomi's age in months and days is given with each example utterance.)

(7) 22:3 (Naomi has dropped an apple she was eating)
Mother: You dropped your apple.

(8) 22:17 (Naomi has pulled a button off)
Mother: The button came off.

(9) 23:25 (Naomi has covered her eyes with her hands)
Father: You covered your eyes.

(10) 25:17 (Naomi has been pulling petals off papers flowers)
Mother: You broke a lot of them.

The parents also used instructional questions about just-completed events, attempting to elicit utterances from Naomi, as in Did you drop it? or What did

you do? These results support previous research that has shown that parents fine-tune their speech to suit the child's current abilities.

Is it, however, the case that the parents only talked about topics that Naomi was already attempting to express? Snow suggested that the parents might introduce new meanings when the child gave evidence of cognitive readiness by trying to express the ideas in speech, and gave a hypothetical example involving past as an illustration:

(11) "Child: See Grampa.

Mother: And what did Grampa give you when you saw him?" (p. 48)

However, another way the use of past tense might be introduced into the conversation would be in adult topic initiations. Therefore, the data were analyzed to determine, for each conversation in which reference was made to Earlier events, whether the child or parent had said something that introduced the topic.

If my data fit Snow's hypothesis, the parents would not have used Earlier past before Naomi first began to express that meaning at 26 months. Instead, there are parental comments and questions referring to Earlier past from 22 months. Furthermore, even after Naomi began to express this meaning, it was not in Topic Initiations but in Responses to parental Initiations. In fact, there were only two instances in the data that were similar to Snow's example, where Naomi mentioned events outside the current situation spontaneously. These are shown in examples (12) and (13):

(12) 26:30 (Naomi and Mother are eating breakfast; Naomi looks into the living room)

Naomi: Daddy broke the fireplace.

(13) 29:8 (Naomi is objecting to putting on her training pants)

Naomi: I can't go in my training pants.

Yestermorning I wear diapers.

In a few instances it is not clear who initiated the topic (as for example in cases where part of the preceding verbal context was unintelligible), but in all other cases it is the parent who introduced Earlier past, with no stimulus from the child. Some examples are given in (14) - (18):

(14) 24:2 (Naomi is starting to cry)

Mother: Remember what we said this morning about being reasonable.

(15) 24:26 (playing with a doll)

Naomi: What's that?

Mother: That's a handkerchief. You were using it yesterday as a blanket for your baby.

(16) 26:30 (Naomi is eating a popsicle)

Naomi: Sticky.

Mother: What did you do today, Naomi?

(17) 27:21 (talking about what is being cooked for dinner)

Naomi: I want to cook my chicken.

Mother: It's in the oven. It's cooking in the oven. (pause) What did you do today with Kimberly, honey?

(18) 29:8 (Naomi is playing with a doll named Alexandra)

Father: Who gave Alexandra to you?

Therefore, in these data for this semantic domain we find that the parents did not limit the semantic content of their speech to what the child was already attempting to express.

Why were there references to Earlier past by the parents? One possibility is that they were insensitive to Naomi's limitations. Her emerging past tense forms which were used for Immediate past may have been misleading. Also, her conversational strategies may have masked her lack of understanding in some cases -- for example, her imitations sometimes were taken as appropriate answers to questions. However, when we look at the parents' use of Earlier past throughout the period in relationship to Naomi's use, it does not seem that the parents ignored cues from the child. Fig. 1 shows the proportion of references to past

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Insert Fig. 1 about here

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that were used for Earlier past, in Naomi's speech and the parents', over time. There is a dramatic change between 25 and 27 months. Recall that Naomi rarely used Earlier past in Initiations at this time. Her increase in usage stems from Responses using Earlier past when the parents introduced the topic into a conversation. This matching of the adult frequency of usage with the child's responsiveness would suggest that one function of the reference to Earlier past from 22 to 25 months may have been as probes to determine what Naomi could do. With occasional probes, the parents' language could reflect subtle changes in the child's receptive abilities and expressive potential long before these were realized in topic-initiating speech.

Indeed, when we look at responses to adult questions about Earlier past before and after 26 months, we find great differences. Questions about Earlier events at 22 months were followed by noncontingent responses or imitations:

(19) 22:18 Mother: Did you go on the slide?

Naomi: Go slide.

(20) 22:18 Mother: What did we do outside?

Naomi: Outside.

At 26 months Naomi began to give appropriate answers to some questions about activities earlier in the day:

(21) 26:30 Mother: What did you do today, Naomi?

Naomi: Took a nap.

(22) 26:30 Mother: What else did you do?

Naomi: I played.

Though, of course, Naomi could not answer all types of questions equally well, her responses would have signalled that talking about Earlier events was an appropriate topic. The parents' rapid increase in initiating this topic then resulted in more frequent use of Earlier past by Naomi in her conversations with them.

As well as functioning as a probe to assess the child's knowledge, the parents' reference to events outside the immediate situation may have had another function: to provide support for the child's developing cognitions. The child begins to acquire the forms that are used to signal past in English over a limited conceptual domain, commenting on what just happened and answering questions about such events. The emerging abilities to deal with past references in

the "easy" sense could then serve as a wedge to create opportunities for learning to use past in the more abstract sense: reference to earlier time. In the child's language, the interplay between semantic development and syntactic realization has been aptly characterized as following the principles "New forms express old functions," and "Old forms express new functions" (Bloom, 1970; Slobin, 1973). I think that these same principles can be seen in the relationship between the input language and the child's language. Once the child knows a form to express a particular function, the input can show the child that that "old form" can be extended to a "new function." In these data, the old form was "use of past markers to refer to Immediate past" and the new function introduced by the parents was "reference to events that occurred earlier in time." Thus, the child may be exposed to new ideas through interactions with adults -- adults who are not deliberately structuring their language to teach -- but who, in the course of quite ordinary everyday talking, use what the child knows to provide opportunities to learn something new.

Footnote

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TABLE 1

SOME ASPECTS OF NAOMI'S ACQUISITION OF PAST

Age	Semantics	Realizations	% Morpheme Use
20-25 months	IMMEDIATE PAST	I did it.	72% at 25 months
		some verbs with -ed	
		some irregular past	
		overgeneralized -ed (e.g., I booded Gammy)	
26-29 months	IMMEDIATE PAST AND EARLIER PAST	-ed	77% at 29 months
		irregular past	
		did (e.g., I did jump)	
		was -ing	
		yestermorning	

Fig. 1. The proportion of all references to past that referred to EARLIER PAST, for the child and adults, with the data grouped into two-month blocks.